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Fishermen

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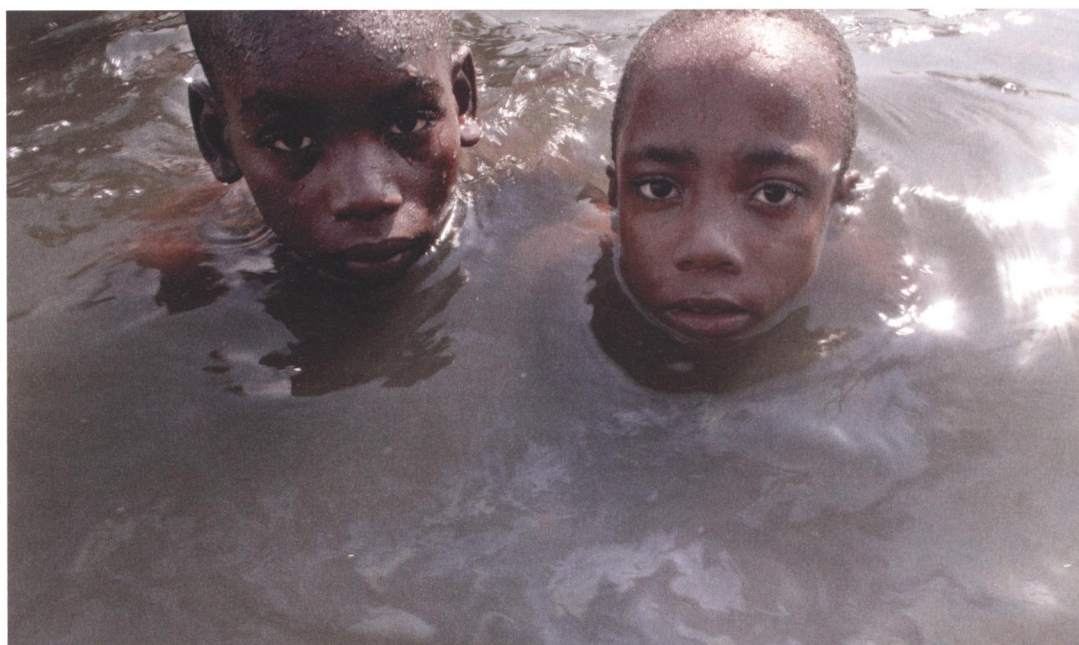


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FICTION



JANE HAHN / CORBIS

Fishermen

by Chigozie John Obioma

The footsteps of one man cannot create a stampede

—Igbo proverb

We were fishermen. Father first called us so after he whipped us sore for fishing at the Ala stream in the summer of May 1995. Earlier that year, the bank had transferred him from our hometown of Akure to Yola, a volatile and violence-prone city in the north of Nigeria. Father wouldn't move us with him so he lived apart and visited only once in two weeks, always coming at midnight on Fridays and disappearing at dawn on Sundays. Each time he returned, mother would detail how the house had fared in his absence—a breakdown of home needs and how they were met, of whom

she had borrowed from, of our school reports, of the church, of street happenings (like the thief lynched by the mob, his horrifying scream as the fire engulfed him). She remembered everything, and we often joked that if she'd been schooled, she would have made a great historian.

Then on one of his visits, mother told how a neighbor caught my brothers and me at the end of our street fishing Ala stream, its dark waters surrounded by acres of the Esan bush.

"My boys were fishing that dangerous stream?"

"Yes, Dim," mother said. "With hooks and sinkers they bought with the pocket money you gave them."

Father coiled like a wrinkled worm, anger building inside him. He was an unusual man. When everyone else was taking up the evangelism of birth control, he had a dream of a house

flowing with children. And he wagged away those who ridiculed his dream as if they were swamp mosquitoes. There were to be many children, in order to have one for every profession. Ikenna would be a doctor; Boja, a lawyer; Obembe, an engineer; me, a professor; David, a pilot. Fisherman was not a part of father's list.

We listened to mother's report from our room in silence, crucified with fear and dread of father's wrath. When she was done, father began to call our names one after the other. He told us to follow mother to the kitchen and bring the hooks and sinkers she'd taken from us. Obembe and I stayed back, outside the door to let our elder brothers take theirs first. We heard father shout that he'd sent us to school to be educated but we'd chosen to become fishermen instead.

"Fishermen," he'd shouted, again and again, as if the word was anathema to him.

When, at last, he retired to his room to rest, his horsewhip slung on his shoulder, we held the seats of our pants and wailed.

But before father left that weekend, he gathered us and instructed us to recite a new anthem.

"We are fishermen," he cried, thrusting his fist aloft so that his tie flung upward.

And we chorused after him: "We are fishermen."

"We trail behind our hooks, lines, and sinkers."

We repeated, but he heard someone say "tail" instead of trail, so he made us pronounce the word in isolation before continuing.

"We are unstoppable," he said. "Menacing. Juggernauts. And we can never fail."

He made us recite it two more times. Even mother joined in. Then we watched his car steer down the dusty road feeling sore that he was leaving again. But that was the day we became his fishermen.

ABULU WAS A MADMAN. HIS BRAIN, OBEMBE SAID, had dissolved into blood after a near-fatal accident. But Abulu's insanity came in two kinds—as though there were twin devils playing competing tunes in his mind.

Most times he went around trailed by a sea of

flies, dancing in the streets, eating wastes from bins, talking to himself in loud voices, screaming at objects, and all the things that stray derelicts do. His face was always patched with boils and dirt that caked to his hairy skin. He went naked, dangling his enormous manhood unabashedly, walking barefooted. Once, when two cars collided on the road, he tread through the shattered glass. As he walked to the decrepit truck in which he sheltered at night, he'd bled so much that he fainted and sprawled in the sand until the police came in the morning and took him away. Many people thought he had died and were shocked to see him back walking the road a week later, his scarred body covered in hospital clothes, his varicose veins concealed by socks.

Sometimes, however, mostly in the evenings when the sun had shed its light and had begun to fade away, he would transform into Abulu, the prophet. He would sing, clap, and preach that people ought to stop bad things. He would come like a thief into unlocked compounds to predict the fate of its residents. He would chase after moving cars shouting out his prophecy. People avoided him when he delved into that realm. It was said that his tongue harbored catastrophes. He was said to have foreseen the ghastly accident that claimed a whole family when their car plunged into a river. When Sola, the daughter of the man who owned the big cinema at the next street, died, it was said that she took her own life because Abulu had prophesied she would suffer a brutal rape. Once, to escape his words, a woman knocked him to the ground with the heel of her shoe. The swelling above his left eye remained until the day he died.

One March evening I was returning from the stream with my brothers and friends, our hooks and sinkers in hand, when we met Abulu along the sandy pathway. He stood under a mango tree, roaring with laughter. We jeered at him, and one of our friends—a thin-armed boy called Kayode, who, at eleven, was a year older than me—threw an unripe mango at him. Abulu caught the fruit and hurled it high into the air, so high, like a javelin, that we watched it descend into the bush in the distance far away. We clapped, called him a superman, and turned

to go when Abulu shouted Ikenna's name—but with a Yoruba accent that lengthened the “e” so it sounded like *Ikena*.

“Let’s go on our way,” our friend Solomon said.

“No,” Ikenna replied bravely. “He has something to say.”

“*Ikena*,” Abulu called. “Your hands will become bound like a bird on the day you shall die.” He covered his eyes in a pantomime of blindness. “Your mouth will not talk again. Your legs will not walk.”

He threw himself to the ground in an acrobatic way, knocked his knees together, and tumbled backward into the sand as though they’d been crippled. The sky had darkened now, and the headlights of cars cast their blighted rays across the path. The birds that nested above the stream had turned into black shapes circling our heads. Even the Nigerian flag that loomed over the police station in the distance had vanished in darkness.

“Your heart will stop beating,” Abulu continued. The burgeoning sound of an aircraft approaching from the east was intensifying. He cast a frenzied gaze up, sprung to his feet, and rasped some last words—lost to me because of the plane’s deafening roar. Then Abulu fell silent. He gazed at us for a moment and then turned to go, singing and clapping as he went.

When we got near home, after the other children had dispersed, Obembe told us he had heard Abulu words.

“Then tell us what he said when the plane was flying past,” Boja said.

Obembe hesitated.

“Tell me,” Ikenna said.

“He said that a fisherman will kill you, Ike.”

“What, a fisherman?” Boja asked aloud.

“Yes, a fisher—” Obembe didn’t complete the word.

We walked on, bruised like we’d been beaten in a fight. We were almost at our gate when Ikenna turned to us and murmured that Abulu meant that one of us would kill him. He stopped before us, his eyes imploring in the darkness like he was expecting something. Then he went into the gate, and we followed him.

A MONSTROUS GRIEF SEIZED MOTHER WHEN I TOLD her. She punctuated every point of my story with a trembling cry, “My God, my God.” That evening, after Ikenna and Boja returned from Solomon’s house where they’d gone to play video games, mother gathered us in her room. She told us that Abulu’s prophecy was serious and not to be taken lightly.

“You have to be cleansed from every evil spell he’s cast on you. We are all going to the crusade at the church this evening.”

We sat quiet for a moment, listening to the sound of mother’s heavy breathing and the playful chattering of our little brother David. Then Ikenna spoke.

“Mama, I’m not going to church today for any cleansing. I can’t bear to stand in front of that congregation and have people crowding around me, trying to cast out some spell.”

“Ikenna, have you lost your mind?”

“No, mama, I just won’t. I don’t believe anything can be done to stop Abulu’s prophecy. We should just try to live our lives.”

“Yes, me too, I will join Ike,” Boja said, rising to his feet.

Mother was about to say something, but the words tripped backward like a man falling from a ladder. She gulped and sobbed.

“Have we taught you nothing?”

“I’m not going,” Ikenna said and ran out of the room, Boja close behind.

When mother recovered from the shock of my elder brothers’ refusal, she washed her face and changed her clothes. Obembe and I put on our best shirts. Obembe wore the T-shirt emblazoned with a beach in the Bahamas that father bought him. I wore the striped shirt Boja had outgrown. Together, we went with mama to the Assemblies of God Church across the long road that stretched to the post office, mother leading the way with David on her back.

The church was a big hall with bright lights that hung down in long lines from the four corners of its ceiling. At the front of the auditorium, a young woman in a white gown sang “Amazing Grace” with an American accent. We sidled in between two rows of people, most of whom kept locking eyes with me until I got the feeling that

we were being watched. My suspicion increased when mother went and whispered in the pastor's ear. When the singer was done, the pastor mounted the podium, dressed in a shirt and tie, his trousers strapped with suspenders.

"Men and brethren," he started in a loud voice that made the speakers near our row go unrecoverably blank so that we had to pick up his voice from the speaker on the other side of the room.

"Before I go ahead tonight with the word of God, let me say—" He paused and laughed, shaking his head. A faint murmur rang through the congregation. "Hallelujah," he said.

"Amen," the church replied.

"I've just been told that the devil, in the form of Abulu, the demon-possessed self-proclaimed prophet whom all of you know has caused so much damage to people's lives in this town, has been to the house of our dear brother James Agwu. You all know him, the husband of our dear sister here, Sister Paulina. Some of you here know that he has many children and refers to them as his 'fishermen.'"

The congregation rumbled with suppressed laughter. Obembe looked at me. I saw the paraphrase of a smile tinge his brow.

"Abulu went to those children and told them lies," the pastor continued, his voice rising as he spat his words furiously into the microphone. "Brethren, if a prophecy is not from God, it ought to be refuted."

The congregation roared in agreement, and mother's voice resounded in my ears. I looked at her and saw that she'd begun to cry again.

"Then stand and refute that prophecy in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

At once, the rows were lifted as people sprang to their feet.

IKENNA WAS NEVER THE SAME AFTER THE ENCOUNTER with Abulu. He believed that if anyone would fulfil the prophecy, it would be Obembe or me. So he developed a hatred for us and whipped us constantly. We were no longer allowed to go out with him and Boja or even play football with them. Then, as years went by, he began to clash with Boja too. Twice one February, four

years after Abulu's prophecy, they cursed at each other and would have fought had Lekan, Ikenna's friend, not stopped them. Then, weeks later, Ikenna gave Boja a slap during an argument. Mother punished him, but after that day, they stopped talking. And Boja came descending like a fallen angel; he spiraled away from manhood back into being a boy like the rest of us.

Ikenna became a python and began to live on the trees above us. He completed his secondary school in May. In August, when mornings in Akure turn fallowed with fog, he got admission to study Electrical Engineering at Abia State University. Father was overjoyed. When he called home, he told us to congratulate our brother. We all did, except Boja—and Ikenna took note.

One clear morning, mother went early to the market. We'd eaten breakfast without Ikenna and yet he was still sleeping. Boja had stopped sharing a room with Ikenna since their previous altercation but still had his clothes in the wardrobe. If he needed something to wear, he waited until Ikenna woke. But, that day, Ikenna did not open the door. Boja waited and waited until he could bear it no longer, then he knocked on the door. There was no response. Boja knocked again.

"Ikenna, open the door."

"Who is that madman disturbing my peace?" a voice thundered from within.

"Ikenna, you are the madman, not me," Boja replied. "You'd better open the door right now."

We heard a noise from within the room, a pause, and then the door flew open. Ikenna lunged forward at Boja.

"You call me a madman?" he cried.

Boja crashed to the floor but scissored Ikenna's legs and brought him down too. Ikenna scrambled to his feet.

"If this is what you want, come out to the open," he said. He pushed through the kitchen door and out to the backyard. Boja closed the lid of the well and then sat down on it and waited. Ikenna appeared and they began to fight again. Obembe and I stood in the doorway, pleading with them to stop.

They fought with a fierceness that fills boys of

that age only when they engage their brothers. Ikenna punched with a zeal that was far greater than when he'd punched the chicken-selling boy at the Isolo market who called mother an *Ashewo*, a whore, when she refused to buy his chicken during the yuletide season. He knocked out one of that boy's teeth, but his blows were harder against Boja. Boja kicked and lunged with more daring than when he'd fought those boys who threatened to stop us from fishing at the stream one Saturday morning. It was as though their hands were possessed by a temper that they knew nothing of but knew them very well. They fought in the sand, shredding their clothes.

Ikenna broke Boja's nose. Deep red blood gushed down his mouth and dripped from his jaw to the ground. He sat weeping and dabbing his bloodied face with the rags his shirt had become. We stood where we were, Obembe and I, pleading in a soft voice that they should stop. Ikenna stood over his younger brother, panting, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing. He spat and, cursing under his breath, turned toward us. But then Ikenna turned back and was on top of Boja again, punching at his battered face. I couldn't stand any more; I told Obembe the best we could do was get a grownup.

The man we found was Mr Bode, the motor mechanic who lived three blocks from our house. He'd just returned to his workshop from relieving himself at the latrine he shared at his five-room bungalow and was washing his hands at the long-necked tap that sprouted from the ground near the wall. We told him breathlessly what was going on in our house, and he turned off the tap and ran back with us, barefooted. The compound was silent when we returned. The pregnant goat that was owned by our neighbors had come into our compound again, though Boja and I had beaten it off two days before. It sat near the gate bleating with its tongue unfurling from its mouth. We took Mr Bode to the backyard, but there was no one there. There were just the bloodied rags and bloodstains on the earth.

In distress, I headed for the garden. Obembe and Mr Bode went inside the house, calling my brothers' names. There was no one in the garden, and I bent near the brick fence to catch

my breath. I heard, in that moment, Obembe's voice, wailing. I dashed to the house and into the kitchen. Mr Debo was standing there, hands on his head, gnashing his teeth. Obembe screamed on the floor. Beside him lay a third person who'd become less than the fishes and tadpoles. His head lay facing the refrigerator, his wide-opened eyes fixed in place. A pool of white foam trailed from his mouth. His hands were thrown wide apart, one of them propped up as though he were asking for something he badly needed. At the middle of his stomach was the wooden end of mother's kitchen knife, its sharp blade buried in his flesh. At this sight, I cried out, but my tongue was lost to Abulu's, such that the name came out corrupted, slashed, subtracted from within, dead and vanishing. *Ikenna*.

IKENNA WAS BURIED FOUR DAYS LATER—WITH BOJA'S whereabouts still unknown.

Father returned home, his car full of luggage including a TV and VCR. He murmured that he had asked to be moved back to Akure when mother first told him about the soaring rivalry between Ikenna and Boja and their fading respect for her. He'd sent his appeal to the headquarters of the bank many times, but they never replied. So the morning after Ikenna's death, he submitted his resignation letter. The branch manager, Mr Asogwa, had lowered his spectacles on his nose and in his ever-faltering stammer, conjured up his astonishment: "Are you out of your mind, Mr Agwu? How would you feed that battalion of yours?" Father had laughed wryly. "You don't understand, Mr Asogwa," he said. "My children are fishermen—"

The funeral was almost concluded when Obembe began to cry. I couldn't; my eyes were fixed on the vanishing face of Ikenna as the sand scattered on his head, over his closed eyes, his nose. Some mourners crouched to help fill up the grave. It was then that it flashed in my mind: Ikenna was a sparrow.

Little things could unbridle his soul. Once he sat at the corridor of the house, alone on a Christmas Eve while the others were inside dancing and singing carols and eating cakes and drinking cokes, when a bird fell to the dirt in

front of him. Ikenna bent low and inched toward it in the dark. He wrapped his hands around its feathery body. It was a sparrow that had been caught by someone and had escaped. A strand of twine was still wound around its leg. Ikenna guarded the bird jealously for three days, feeding it with whatever he could find. Mother asked him to let it go, but he refused. Then, one morning, he lifted the bird's lifeless body in his hand and dug a hole in the backyard, heartbroken. He and Boja covered the sparrow with sand until the bird vanished from our eyes. This was exactly how Ikenna vanished, swallowed by the sand we threw into the grave. First, it swallowed his white-shrouded trunk, then his legs, arms and face—forever from our eyes.

Boja was fungus. His heart pumped blood that was filled with fungus. His tongue was infected with fungus. His kidneys were filled with fungus and made him a bed-wetter. When he couldn't stop, mother became worried that her children were under a spell, so the anointing oil greased the edges of the mattress we slept on. He was a destructive fungus that could devour the body of a man, collapse his spirit, banish his soul, and leave a hole through which his blood would empty to the ground. But he was also a self-destructing fungus who needed no one to kill him. He ate himself.

The fasting for Ikenna was still on, and we were praying for Boja's return. His photo was still popping up on Ondo State Television News with the heading: MISSING PERSON. The police were still frequenting our house to announce their slow progress in the search for Boja with an air of pride, the pride of a Nigerian policeman. They had just left that afternoon and we were having lunch in the sitting room when a neighbor who had gone to fetch water from our well came screaming. She'd found Boja's body in the dark waters. We rushed out and found him, his hands floating at the surface, his clothes forming a parachute around him.

Obembe was the searchlight, the man who found the way, who discovered, who knew, who saw first, who examined things and who, when he was lost, could recover himself. He'd noticed two days before we found Boja that the

water from the well was greasy and gave off a foul odor. Obembe was an omnivorous reader. He consumed and stored information like a cud he regurgitated and chewed over each night before we slept. When we were still fishermen, he told me the story of a man who went into the bush of ghosts. He told me about the Princess of Wales, her death in a London tunnel. The night Ikenna was covered with earth, he told me the story of the *Odyssey* of Homer from a simplified and compressed version he'd read. The night Boja was dragged up from the well, he told me the story of *Things Fall Apart*. I listened as usual in the darkness, the moonlight glowing on the wall. His voice rose above our rattling fan.

"You see, Ben," Obembe said, "The people of Umuofia were conquered because they were not united."

"It's true," I said.

"The white men were a common enemy that would have been easily conquered if the tribe had fought as one. Our brothers have left us today because there was a division between them."

"Yes," I muttered.

"But do you know why Ike and Boja were divided?"

I hesitated.

"Abulu's prophecy," he said. "They died because Ikenna believed it and let it stay in his soul."

We lay in silence for a while, my memory drifting backward.

"I will kill Abulu," Obembe whispered.

"What?" I cried. "Why would you do that?"

Obembe gazed at me a moment then shook his head.

"I will do it for my brothers, because they were father's fishermen too."

He stood and went to the table by the window. From the darkness came two flashes of a lighter, then the glow of his cigarette. He blew the smoke out the window and sobbed noisily like a child.

IN NOVEMBER, WHEN THE DRY HARMATTAN BREEZE turned people's skin ashen white, father opened a bookshop in Akure. A local carpenter con-

structed a large wooden signboard, and an electric sign that glowed blue light was fixed on top of the shop; they both read **IKEBOJA BOOKSHOP**. It was David alone who had to be told that the name was a combination of our brothers' names. Father told us he got three thousand books for a start and that it would take him days to load them on the shelves. When we came out of the bookshop, a big black bird was sitting on the electric sign. On our way home, we saw Abulu coming out of a restaurant, a loaf of fresh bread tucked under his arm. Father drove past as though he didn't see him, but mother hissed and murmured, "Evil man." Obembe looked at me. He had been avoiding me since the night I questioned him. I feared he was drawing a line between us.

But seeing Abulu changed me. I saw that he was, indeed, the cause of my family's common heartache, the designer of our grief. It was him that planted the knife in Ikenna's stomach and threw Boja into the well. Abulu was our enemy.

When we got home, I went to Obembe in the room that Ikenna and Boja had shared, the room which he had begun to occupy since the night we argued. I knocked on the door. When he opened, I smelled the stench of cigarette smoke. I told him I was ready to fight for our brothers.

For many nights after that, we planned how we would kill Abulu. Sometimes Obembe smoked, puffing out into the dark night through the window while we sat and weaved scenarios. We chased Abulu into an oncoming car that spilled the contents of his head on the tarred road. We climbed atop the backyard fence with our catapults and waited for him to pass so we could break his head with rocks. We laid in wait for him at the Ala stream where he always went to wash himself in the evenings. We attacked him with our fishing hooks, ripping his naked flesh until he lay still, dead. It was Obembe who suggested this; when he was done with it, he rose from the bed and lighted a cigarette while I watched the shadow of his back on the wall.

Toward Christmas, the harmattan turned to a morbid gray fog that sagged so low that houses on distant streets were hidden. The

headlights of cars emerged from the fog and vanished back into it. For many days, we went to the Ala stream with our lines and a torchlight and waited for hours, hiding in the mango trees. On the day Abulu finally arrived, there were two other men there, disobeying the curfew, too. They waded out, their clothes on shore, until darkness swallowed them and we could no longer hear their voices and we thought they'd gone. When we heard Abulu's voice coming toward the stream, singing happily, we climbed down from the mango trees. We were about to run down to the stream when the men screamed at Abulu and chased him back. From the faint light of the moon, we saw that the men were naked, their penises stuck out before them like trouser ropes. When they felt Abulu had gone, they disappeared into the darkness at the shore of the stream. Obembe whispered that he would flash the torch to frighten them away. Before I could stop him, the torch illuminated the black water of the stream and two naked men propped on top of each other, moaning. We fled with our lines.

It was four days to Christmas, a Friday, when we next sneaked out of the house through the backyard with our lines and raced down to the stream. On our way, we saw Abulu running toward a parked car.

"You will fall like a tree, Michael Oliga. Your children will—"

He tripped and fell. As he rose, the car sped away. Abulu tried to chase it, but the Mercedes accelerated, leaving its print on the sand road. We waited, watching. Ala stream was a kilometer away, but we could smell the odor of dead leaves on its shores. The sun had set and darkness was gradually veiling the horizon. Abulu turned and went in the direction of the stream. We followed until we heard the spontaneous splash of water and singing. I waited cautiously for Obembe's command. He walked quietly to the stream, and then returned and whispered that there was no one else nearby.

Later we couldn't say why we had cried out so loudly as we lunged for Abulu. Perhaps it was that my heart had stopped beating the moment I sprang to my feet and I wanted to scare

it back to life. Perhaps it was that Obembe had begun to sob and had to let the rage inside him out. Abulu was lying near the shore, facing the sky, clapping as he sang. We slashed our hooks blindly at his chest, his face, his hands as he tried to protect himself, his legs as he tried to rise. We punctured his flesh and tore away chunks of it when the hooks caught. We kept hitting, pulling, striking, shouting, sobbing until the voices that had suddenly emerged behind us, turned into the figures of two men, the men we'd flashed a week before. One of them held me from behind and wrestled me to the ground. I watched Obembe's shadow, running along the trees, calling out my name as the other chased after him. I sprang up and hit the man and ran away as quickly as I could.

Later that night, we removed our blood-stained shirts and flung them over the fence like kites into the bush behind our compound. Then we hid Obembe's gear behind the garden. We noticed by the torchlight, a chunk of Abulu's bloody flesh on the hook. As Obembe knocked the hook against the wall to remove it, I crouched and threw up.

Later that night, when we went to bed, Obembe turned to me in the dark.

"We'll go to prison if they find us," he whispered. "We have to leave this night."

"What, leave home?"

I was astonished.

"Right now."

He threw open the wardrobe and hurriedly began to pack clothes into his bag.

"Where will you go?" I asked.

"Anywhere." He'd started to sob. "They will find us by morning—the police or a street mob."

He zipped the bag then turned to me.

"Won't you stand up from there?" he cried.

"No," I replied.

He paused and sat on the edge of the bed. "They'll find us."

He pulled me toward him. For a long time, he sobbed against my shoulder. Then, through the darkness, I saw the window open and watched

his shadow, carrying the outline of a bag, pause on the ledge.

"I will write you," he promised.

I heard the thud of the bag on the ground outside, then the sound of his feet, but I did not stand up to watch him go.

THE NEXT TIME I SAW FATHER, HE HAD GROWN A GRAY beard. He could barely look at my face even though I sat between him and mama at the back of the car; his eyes hovered over the streets as David drove us back to the house. I saw the old decrepit truck where Abulu used to live as we passed. A cockerel was standing on top of it. I asked him if Obembe ever wrote in the ten years I'd been away.

"Not even once," he said absently and repeated it twice more.

I was saddened by what father had become—a gaunt, wiry man whom life, like a blacksmith, had pounded into the shape of a sickle. He used to defend fathering so many children by saying he wanted us to be many so that there could be diversity of success in the family. "My children will be like fishermen," he'd say. "They will go out and catch all kinds of fishes so that we will eat in plenty. Some of them will be lawyers, doctors, engineers—and see, our Obembe, has become a soldier."

But the last time I heard father say *fisherman* was in the Akure high court, shortly before my trial. He'd told me to tell them honestly all that happened, and he had recited the last parts of our anthem in whispers so that the words—*menacing, juggernauts, and we can never fail*—struck in my head a constant refrain as I went to the trial box with the policemen. When it was my turn to speak and the judge told me to rise, I first turned and looked at father with mother and David sitting beside him.

"We were fishermen," I started. And mother cried out and startled the court. I waited for father to cover her mouth with his hand and for the attention of the court to return to me. Then I cleared my throat and started over again. ■